

BISHOP NIKOLAJ VELIMIROVIĆ:  
OLD CONTROVERSIES IN HISTORICAL  
AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

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Фонд за науку  
Републике Србије

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## “Nationalism”, “Fascism” and “Anti-Semitism” of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović\*

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More than a five years ago I received an email from a young German convert to Orthodox Christianity asking me to help him with revising the entry on Nikolaj Velimirović on the German version of Wikipedia. He was distressed because the saint was depicted as a nationalist or the co-founder of political ideology of Serbian ‘Saint-Savian nationalism,’ a fascist or the inspirer of the Serbian fascist movement Zbor, which collaborated with Nazi Germany during the Second World War and as an anti-Semite.<sup>1</sup> According to the opinion of the young convert some facts about Nikolaj’s life were very deliberately suppressed in the entry. Since the Wikipedia entries cannot be changed he proposed to supplement the existing entry with new information that would stress the facts that: a) Nikolaj was one of the first victims of Nazi Germany, being imprisoned first in Serbia and then in Dachau almost the whole duration of the Second World War; b) he was a very severe critic of Serbian nationalism for turning Christianity into a tribal religion, and c) he saved the lives of some Jews, by hiding them from Nazis at the beginning of WWII. The German convert hoped that this new information would, if not challenge, then soften, the constructed image of Nikolaj. Since the sentences depicting Nikolaj in negative terms were according to the German convert ‘cleverly’ put together, he asked for my help. Finally, he stated that his action was inspired by the sayings

\* This research was supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia, PROMIS, Grant no. 6062708, SerbRightWing.

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia entry on Nikolaj Velimirović: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolaj\\_Velimirovi%C4%87](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolaj_Velimirovi%C4%87).



of Church Fathers that one should not lie about the saints, as well as his opinion that hardly any other people in Germany are so defamed as the Serbian people, and that both issues should be corrected.

Far from being an expert on Nikolaj Velimirović, I thoroughly examined the scholarly sources on which the entry was based. The most quoted sources were scholarly authorities in the field, such as the German Roman-Catholic theologian Fr Rudolf Chrysostomus Grill, who obtained his doctoral dissertation on Nikolaj Velimirović from the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome in the mid 1990s, as well as two German historians of Southeastern Europe, late Professor Holm Sundhaussen from *Frei Universität Berlin* and his former doctoral student, now professor at the University of Regensburg, Klaus Buchenau. Thus, although the Wikipedia entry might be considered as biased towards Nikolaj Velimirović, it was substantiated with scholarly material produced by leading experts in the field. From the viewpoint of an Orthodox Christian and a Serb or a German Serbophile, it matters whether his or her Church has canonized a person who is a nationalist, fascist and anti-Semite, because it sends a message about the values this Church and people stand for. Since nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism are based on love for one nation at the expense of other nations, as well as the hate of other nations, particularly Jews, they are not compatible with the notion of holiness, characterized by perfect goodness and righteousness. By accusations concerning nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism the holiness of Nikolaj Velimirović was directly challenged and therefore many people concerned with such a depiction of Nikolaj attempted to free him from these charges. However, such scholarly attempts, being informed by personal feelings and opinions and not as proper scholarly investigations by research and reasoning, are usually deemed as an apology or advocacy of Nikolaj.

The aim of this paper is to analyze existing views on Nikolaj as an ardent nationalist, fascist and anti-Semite and to offer different interpretations of Nikolaj's attitudes about these issues. This endeavor is motivated not by an intention to clear Nikolaj Velimirović as a saint of the Orthodox Church of all charges, but rather by a conviction that many of the charges against Nikolaj are products of later controversies connected to his work. Doubt in scholarly objectivity of some authors

arises from the fact that assessments of the works of Nikolaj Velimirović written before the Yugoslav wars of the 1990's, or in the first years of these wars, does not mention his nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism. Thus, Thomas Bremer's *Ekklesiale Struktur und Ekklesiologie in der Serbischen Orthodoxen Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* defended as a PhD thesis in 1990 at the University of Muenster and published as a book in 1992 mentions that Velimirović's ecclesiology is very closely connected with the national idea, as an indispensable and necessary element,<sup>2</sup> but it does not go so far as to identify the elements of nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism in his theology. Similarly, Rudolf Chrysostomus Grill's doctoral thesis *Serbischer Messianismus und Europa bei Bischof Velimirovic (†1956)*, defended at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome and published in 1998, draws a parallel between Russian messianism and Serbian messianism proclaimed by Nikolaj, points to the similarities in their views on Europe, but still acknowledges Nikolaj's vision of the Holy Church in Holy Europe.<sup>3</sup> However, already in the foreword of Rudolf Grulich to this book it is emphasized that Nikolaj's ideas are part of the background of Serbian president 'Slobodan Milošević's aggression against Croatia in 1991 and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992.<sup>4</sup> One may suppose that the subsequent studies on Nikolaj in German and Western academia have been built on the presupposition that Nikolaj's ideas may have fueled Serbian nationalism and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990's and therefore they should be scrutinized.

In the remainder of this paper, I intend first to demonstrate that charges concerning nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism are not exclusively applied to Nikolaj Velimirović, but they are elements of a wider strategy of discrediting someone, usually a political adversary, in contemporary media and scholarship. Next, I will explore the reasons why Nikolaj became a particularly relevant historical figure for being scapegoated. Finally, I will investigate, one by one, charges against him for being nationalist, fascist and anti-Semite.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Bremer's *Ekklesiale Struktur und Ekklesiologie in der Serbischen Orthodoxen Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1992), 158.

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf Chrysostomus Grill, *Serbischer Messianismus und Europa bei Bischof Velimirovic († 1956)*, (St Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1998), 213.

<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Grulich, "Vorworth," in Grill, *Serbischer Messianismus*, 12.

### From scholarship to conventional wisdom and back

Almost every contemporary publication dealing with the Serbian church in the interwar period mentions Nikolaj Velimirović either as an ardent nationalist or a Hitler admirer or an anti-Semite, or all three.<sup>5</sup> Such a description of Nikolaj became generally accepted belief or conventional wisdom. As I have mentioned earlier, proving Nikolaj's nationalism, fascism and anti-Semitism is not an isolated case, but rather a rule frequently employed in the political and media realm in order to disqualify somebody or something.

The current war in Ukraine is a good example of the employment of such conventional wisdom. Already in his lecture 'UnCommon Core: The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis' delivered at the University of Chicago in late 2014, the political scientist John Mearsheimer indicated four elements of conventional wisdom regarding the causes of the conflict. Namely: a) Russian President Vladimir Putin is the main cause of the conflict, b) Putin is crazy and irrational, c) Putin is bent on creating a greater Russia and d) Putin bears marked resemblance to Hitler.<sup>6</sup> Here it is evident that driven by Russian nationalism Putin aims to create a greater Russia, and that he is similar to Hitler in pursuing his goals. Such views are so widespread in western media and accepted by the general audience that questioning them would put one on the side of Putin.

This kind of classification, with or without variation, was applied to certain political figures in Yugoslavia during the wars in the 1990s. Thus, the late president of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, was usually depicted by western media as the main originator of the wars in Yugoslavia, caused either out of his madness, or out of his intention to create a greater Serbia on the ruins of Yugoslavia. In the last instance, Milošević

<sup>5</sup> Jovan Byford, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," in *World Fascism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 2: L-Z, ed. Cyprian Blamires (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC - CLIO, 2006), 492; Raymond Detrez, "Religion in the Yugoslav Successor States at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century," in *Religion in the Post-Yugoslav Context*, ed. Branislav Radeljić & Martina Topić (Lanham - Boulder - New York - London: Lexington Books 2015), 17-38: 27.

<sup>6</sup> John Mearsheimer, "Why is Ukraine the West's Fault?": [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrMiSQAGOS4&list=FLXtnoSkiW2iomIRaMWEKlbw&index=2&t=1694s&ab\\_channel=TheUniversityofChicago](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrMiSQAGOS4&list=FLXtnoSkiW2iomIRaMWEKlbw&index=2&t=1694s&ab_channel=TheUniversityofChicago)

was compared to Hitler. However, this tendency was not only characteristic of some western media, but also of certain historians and political scientists working on the region of the Balkans. Already in the subtitle of her famous book *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milosević* from 2002, Sabrina Ramet points out that the main cause of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and, thus, of the Yugoslav wars too, was Slobodan Milošević.<sup>7</sup> One can hardly find a single page in her book without references to Milošević. The investigation of Milošević’s alleged madness is presented as insights into his ‘narcissistic’ character,<sup>8</sup> and the assessment of his ‘psychopathic paranoia.’<sup>9</sup> Milošević has also been seen as a proponent of greater Serbian nationalism and the chief creator of a greater Serbia.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Ramet concludes that Milošević’s biography shares some points in common with the biography of his fellow dictator Hitler.<sup>11</sup>

One may look for the origins of this fourfold categorization in Judeo-Christian tradition, particularly in the book of Genesis. Thus, the world created by God was good, but some angelic and human beings due to their free will disobeyed the will of God and sinned. The consequence of their disobedience was their corrupted nature and will which became generators of new sins and creators of evil in the world. The same story may be told in the following way: a) Adam is the main cause of all human hardship, and death (Gen. 3:19), b) as the consequence of sin Adam’s nature is corrupted (Gen 3: 21), c) Adam was bent on achieving deification without God (Gen 3: 5), and d) by using his free will against God Adam bears marked resemblance to Satan, as the personification of absolute evil (Gen 3:4-5).

Like the fourfold gradations applied to Putin and Milošević, the forefather Adam is the main cause or agent in the process and he bears the greatest responsibility. He is deficient in some way or his nature or character is corrupted. He aims to achieve something at the expense of

<sup>7</sup> Sabrina Ramet, *Balkan Babel: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia from the Death of Tito to the Fall of Milosević* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xix, 331.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 331–332.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36, 162,

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

someone else and because of the wrong ways in achieving his ends he is evil. The main problem with this categorization is the loss of the sense of evil. The consequence of the Nietzschean ‘death of God’ was also a ‘death of Satan,’ because Satan has ceased to play a significant role in the imagination of modern men and women. However, as a church historian, Alec Ryrie argues that western civilization did not need to wait too long for the new personification of absolute evil. Since 1945 the Holocaust is recognized in western civilization as a universally accepted reference point for what constitutes absolute evil.<sup>12</sup> The direct consequence of this, according to Ryrie, is not only that the new secular definition of evil overrides all other definitions of evil proposed by world religions, but that every aspect of public action, including religious, is assessed in relation to this reference point.

The Holocaust not only became the universally accepted reference point to evil, but the Holocaust perpetrator became a worst epithet in analogies used in political, media and social media debates. In order to motivate people to think harder about the Holocaust as a universally accepted reference point to evil, the attorney Mike Godwin introduced in 1990 “Godwin’s law” (or rule) of Nazi analogies.<sup>13</sup> Godwin’s law or the *reductio ad Hitlerum* indicates the probability of a comparison of someone or something to Nazis or Adolf Hitler in online debate as this debate increases in length.<sup>14</sup> Although Godwin proposed this rule as a pedagogical and rhetorical tool for avoiding Nazi and Fascist comparison in the Internet forums, the effect was quite the opposite. The *reductio ad Hitlerum* became a widespread phenomenon in mainstream western media for demonizing or intimidating political opponents. It has not only been applied to those foreign leaders who have challenged the universal supremacy of the USA, such as Slobodan Milošević and Vladimir Putin, but also to US politicians, such as the former US pres-

<sup>12</sup> Alec Ryrie, “Two Kingdoms in the Third Reich”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEdnwpo28NM>.

<sup>13</sup> Mike Godwin, “I Seem To Be A Verb: 18 Years of Godwin’s Law,” Jewcy.com. April 30, 2008: [https://jewcy.com/arts-and-culture/i\\_seem\\_be\\_verb\\_18\\_years\\_godwins\\_law](https://jewcy.com/arts-and-culture/i_seem_be_verb_18_years_godwins_law).

<sup>14</sup> “Godwin Law” in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press): <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/340583?redirectedFrom=Godwin%27s+law#eid>.

ident Donald Trump, and to political movements, such as the alt-right. Moreover, it has become a common tool in social media debates for demonizing and intimidating certain targets.

The *reductio ad Hitlerum* is successfully applied by scholars, at first to present political figures and then past personalities and concepts. Thus, Nikolaj Velimirović is subjected to the same key of interpretation as political leaders, being ultimately associated with ideological advocates of Nazism, Holocaust perpetrators and proponents of anti-Semitism. The *reductio ad Hitlerum* of Nikolaj Velimirović consists of all four elements. Thus, Nikolaj appears in several publications as the main force not only of Serbian nationalism and fascism, but also of Orthodox anti-Westernism. The element of madness or irrationality usually attributed to political leaders is in the case of Nikolaj presented as a sort of cunningness and deceitfulness that again reflects his corrupted nature like madness reflects the corrupted natures of Hitler, Trump and Putin. Next, similar to political leaders who have certain ideological motivations in common, Nikolaj is described as a proponent of Serbian nationalism and chauvinism. Finally, Nikolaj’s similarity to Hitler is portrayed in terms of his collaboration with Nazism and his anti-Semitism. Since there is no evidence of personal collaboration of Nikolaj with Nazis during the Second World War, because Nikolaj spent the war as a German prisoner, first in Serbia and then in Germany, the link between Nikolaj and the Nazis is established through pre-WWII right-wing politicians, such as Dimitrije Ljotić and his movement Zbor. The book *Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window* remains the main source of arguing for Nikolaj’s anti-Semitism.

### **Bishop Nikolaj as the main cause of calamities**

In contrast to political leaders such as Hitler, Milošević, Trump or Putin, who according to *reductio ad Hitlerum* interpretations bear the sole responsibility for the Second World War and holocaust, the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and subsequent Yugoslav wars, destruction of USA democratic institutions and the wars of Russia with its neighbors respectively, portraying Nikolaj Velimirović as the main cause of nationalism in the Serbian church, which fuelled the Yugoslav wars in

the 1990s was not an easy task. Although acknowledging the important role of Nikolaj Velimirović for Serbian nationalism and fascism, many political scientists are hesitant to ascribe him a greater historical part in the Serbian nationalistic project. While many scholars today establish links between Vladimir Putin and the philosopher Ivan Ilyin, as the one who provided metaphysical and moral justification for Putin's Russian 'fascism,' there were no attempts to establish similar links between Slobodan Milošević and Bishop Nikolaj.

I have argued before that the German scholarship on the Serbian Church follows to a certain extent the German media in relation to the Balkans.<sup>15</sup> Thus, there are three phases in the approach of the German press to the Serbian Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> The first phase is characterized by a neutral approach towards the Serbian Church, which is considered as one of various agents in the very complex social and cultural milieu of the post-Yugoslav era. This phase lasted until 2004, and it was succeeded by the phase in the German press in which the Serbian Church became the key actor, responsible for most if not all problems in the region. The Serbian Church was depicted as a stronghold of nationalism, conservatism and anti-modernity. In the third and last phase which is from 2014 onwards, interest in the Serbian Church in the German press is substituted with interest for the Orthodox Church in general and the Russian Church in particular. One may see that the same pattern applied to Serbia and the Serbian Church during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is now applied to the Russian Church and Russia is characterized as the main villain in the conflict in Ukraine. It became commonplace in the German press to find the explanation for Russian aggression in Ukraine (as for Serbian aggression in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo) in Orthodox Christianity, or, to be specific, in 19th

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Cvetković, "The Reception of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century German Academia," in M. Knežević (ed.), *Philosophos – Philotheos – Philoponos: Studies and Essays as Charisteria in Honor of Professor Bogoljub Šijaković on the Occasion of His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (Belgrade: Gnomon, Podgorica: Matica srpska 2021), 993–1004.

<sup>16</sup> Jelena Jorgačević Kisić, "The Serbian Orthodox Church in the German Press: How far is Byzantium," in *Schein and Sein: Sichtbares und Unsichtbares in den Kulturen Südoeuropas*, hrg. Wolfgang Dahmen und Gabriella Schubert (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 199–211: 206–207.

century Orthodox nationalism and anti-Westernism by which these Churches are now driven.<sup>17</sup>

In German historiography, like in the German press until 2004, the Serbian Church is depicted as one of the multiple agents in the complex Yugoslav reality. In his book *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus in Jugoslawien 1945-1991: ein serbisch-kroatischer Vergleich* from 2004, Klaus Buchenau argues that the national mobilization and false evangelization of the Serbian Church, especially connected with the campaign over Kosovo during the 1980s, bears the responsibility for the wars of the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Although Buchenau has a number of references to Nikolaj, many of these references are historically neutral. Only in a few of them, Nikolaj is mentioned as sharing with the Zbor leader Dimitrije Ljotić sympathies for the Serbian village and anti-modern attitudes,<sup>19</sup> and with Justin Popović Serbian Orthodox anti-Westernism<sup>20</sup> and ecclesial nationalism.<sup>21</sup> Buchenau also mentions Nikolaj’s anti-Semitic attitudes exposed in his book written in two and half months while he was in the Dachau concentration camp.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Buchenau also criticizes Rudolph Chysostomus Grill for remaining blind to Nikolaj’s nationalism.<sup>23</sup> Although Buchenau attributes to Nikolaj nationalism, anti-Westernism and anti-Semitism, Nikolaj remains just one of many leaders of the Serbian Church whose negative role led to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia and the consequent wars.

Similar to the German press of the period from 2004 to 2013, in which the Serbian Church becomes the main protagonist, in Klaus Buchenau’s book *Auf russischen Spuren: orthodoxe Antiwestler in Serbien, 1850-1945* published in 2011 Nikolaj Velimirović and his student Justin Popović play the main role in the adoption of Russian anti-West-

<sup>17</sup> Kristina Stoeckl, “The Orthodox Component in the Russian Support for Eastern Ukrainian Separatists,” in: <https://www.iwm.at/transit-online/orthodox-component-russian-support-eastern-ukrainian-separatists/>

<sup>18</sup> Buchenau, *Orthodoxie und Katholizismus in Jugoslawien 1945-1991*, 379-391.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



ernism and hatred towards the West and Europe.<sup>24</sup> Buchenau considers Nikolaj Velimirović's and Justin Popović's discussion on European identity, not as a critique of European internal conditions that led to the First World War and consequently the Second World War as perused by other religious and secular European thinkers of that time, but as a form of anti-Westernism.

Similarly, in his book *Götter der Nationen* from 2014,<sup>25</sup> Stefan Rohdewald portrays the patron saints of Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia, St Sava, St John of Rila, and St Clement of Ohrid as national gods of the Orthodox people. He identifies the Serbian Kosovo covenant with Kosovo mythology,<sup>26</sup> and Svetosavlje with an 'ethno-philosophy',<sup>27</sup> and deems Nikolaj Velimirović as a proponent of both. Rohdewald also links Velimirović to fascism through Dimitrije Ljotić.<sup>28</sup>

The same tendency to interpret the Orthodox theological heritage of the Balkan Churches through the prism of nationalism and anti-Westernism may be observed in Anna Julia Lis' monograph *Zur Konstruktion des „Westens“ in den Schriften von Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović, Christos Yannaras und John S. Romanides*, published in 2019 by Peter Lang.<sup>29</sup> Among other things, Lis accused Nikolaj Velimirović and Justin Popović for anti-Semitism because for both authors Jewish treason of God leads them to suicide.<sup>30</sup> Velimirović, according to Lis, extended the same metaphor to Europe and its abandonment of God.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Klaus Buchenau, *Auf russischen Spuren. Orthodoxe Antiwestler in Serbien, 1850–1945* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Stefan Rohdewald, *Götter der Nationen. Religiöse Erinnerungsfiguren in Serbien, Bulgarien und Makedonien bis 1944* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2014), 512–546.

<sup>26</sup> Rohdewald, *Götter der Nationen*, 508, 546.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 546.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.

<sup>29</sup> Anna Julia Lis, *Zur Konstruktion des „Westens“ in den Schriften von Nikolaj Velimirović, Justin Popović, Christos Yannaras und John S. Romanides*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2019). Lis is also an author of the article "Anti-Western Theology in Greece and Serbia Today," in *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness: Values, Self-Reflection, Dialogue*, ed. Andrii Krawchuk and Thomas Bremer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), 159–168.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 115.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

All three German authors who produced extensive works on Nikolaj in the period between 2004 and 2019 have the same focus on Nikolaj’s alleged nationalism, fascism and less on his anti-Semitism. However, Nikolaj appears as the main figure in introducing these phenomena in the Orthodox Church and particularly the Serbian Church and therefore is perceived as the main cause of ecclesial estrangements.

### **Bishop Nikolaj as a cunning opportunist: The relationship towards Catholicism**

The next element that is observed in Nikolaj’s character, which corresponds to the madness or irrationality usually attributed to political leaders, is opportunism and cunningness which Nikolaj employs for attaining his goals. Another severe critic of Nikolaj’s anti-Semitism, Jovan Byford writes in his book *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism*:

Significantly, however, the enthusiasm for Yugoslavia as a league of equal nations and faiths which Velimirović professed in his speeches reflected his role as the representative of the Serbian state, rather than his genuine political orientation. Behind the enthusiastic conciliatory rhetoric lay a profound suspicion towards Catholicism which he regarded as “the most conservative among western denominations” (see Bigović, 1998, p. 35). In public, Velimirović readily advocated the signing of a Concordat with the Vatican as a mark of Serbia’s broadmindedness and tolerance. Also, he proclaimed that in Yugoslavia, once it was created, the Serbian Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches would be on equal footing, with comparable rights and privileges (e.g., Velimirović, 1916a, pp. 70–71). In conversations with his associates, however, he endorsed the opposite view. He called for complete severance of ties with the Vatican and the creation of a national (Yugoslav) Catholic Church. Similarly, he maintained that following unification, Orthodox Christianity should not forfeit the status of state religion which it previously occupied in the Kingdom of Serbia (memoirs of Dr. Bogumil Bošnjak, cited in Janković, 2002a, p. 39).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Jovan Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism: Post-Communist Remembrance of the Serbian Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 30.

In modern research, Nikolaj's attitude toward the Catholic Church is often interpreted as negative. As evident from the above quotation, Byford suggests that despite Nikolaj's earlier support of the Serbian government to sign a concordat with the Vatican as an expression of sincerity and openness to Catholics in Serbia, there is continuity in Nikolaj's negative attitudes toward the Catholic Church. According to Byford, in addition to publicly advocating good relations with the Roman Catholic Church in Serbia and later in Yugoslavia, Nikolaj advocated in private talks severing all ties with the Vatican and establishing a national (Yugoslav) Catholic Church. For Byford, Nikolaj's attitude does not only demonstrate his hidden agenda, but also Nikolaj's opportunist character.

Similar to Byford, Klaus Buchenau argues that Nikolaj's ambiguous stance toward the Catholic Church is reflected in the public acceptance of the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand, and in hidden distrust on the other hand. While Byford is explicit that Nikolaj advocates 'Serbian Orthodox exclusivity,' Buchenau believes that Nikolaj's motive for rapprochement between the two churches remained unclear, as rapprochement was sometimes presented as a political instrument and sometimes as a precondition for uniting the churches into a common Yugoslav church.<sup>33</sup> However, Buchenau agreed with Byford that for Nikolaj the rapprochement of the churches actually meant the conversion of Roman Catholics to Orthodoxy. According to these authors, it turns out that Nikolaj's attitude toward the Catholic Church in his early works was either insincere, because he wanted to instrumentalize the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia for Serbian national and ecclesial goals, or it was not clear enough even to Nikolaj. Therefore, Nikolaj appears either as a deceitful and two-faced person or as a person who takes actions without any previous planning.

In my opinion Nikolaj's relationship toward the Catholic Church is straightforward and frank from the beginning.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, in addition to the two interpretations mentioned above, there is a third, which

<sup>33</sup> Buchenau, *Auf russischen Spuren*, 161.

<sup>34</sup> Here I follow the argumentation exposed in Vladimir Cvetković, "Još jedan osvrt na predavanje 'Nacionalizam Svetog Save' Svetog Nikolaja Žičkog," *Crkvene studije* 16 (2019): 131–148.



Bishop Nikolaj with Archpriest Stevan Dimitrijević and pilgrims in front of the church of Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem in 1930  
(Courtesy of Goran Veljković, Kragujevac)



Bishop Nikolaj at the inter-Orthodox preparatory committee in 1930 at the monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos (Courtesy of Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki, Internet source <https://www.mbp.gr/>)

makes it possible to connect Nikolaj's early works from the pre-WW period with one from the interwar period, without resorting to the already stated arguments. Byford's position that Nikolaj advocated good relations with the Catholic Church in Serbia before and during the Second World War and later in Yugoslavia, and at the same time advocated severing all ties with the Vatican and founding a national (Yugoslav) Catholic Church is correct, but it should not be considered a product of Nikolaj's insincerity. As early as 1909, in the article 'The Great Crisis in Roman Catholicism,' Nikolaj discusses the reception of the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* of Pope Pius X from July 1907, which condemns anti-modernist views in the Roman Catholic Church. Here, Nikolaj refers to the French Catholic theologian Alfred Loisy's invitation to the pope to "accept his vocation as teacher again, and to abandon all pretensions to rule the world."<sup>35</sup> At the end of this article, Nikolaj concludes that Pope Pius X with this encyclical destroyed all human efforts to make humanity feel as one, and that the papal system, which encloses and limits everything, and under which the Catholic Church sighs, must disappear. Nikolaj ends with the question: will Catholicism disappear with the papacy? to which he answers that Catholicism existed before the papacy, and will continue to exist after it, because Catholicism is guided by truth and directed towards salvation.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Nikolaj's commitment to severing all ties with the Vatican and the papacy is not directed toward Catholicism, but is inspired by bringing 'renewed and reborn' Catholicism into a closer relationship 'with other parts of Christianity.'

In the context of Yugoslav unification, Nikolaj often refers to the document of the Roman Catholic clergy of the Zagreb diocese from 1848, which proclaims the following goals: unification of Serbs and Croats, tolerance of differences in the Creed, and use of Old Slavonic language in worship services of the Yugoslav Catholic Church.<sup>37</sup> Buchenau well observes that when Nikolaj speaks about political and na-

<sup>35</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, "Velika kriza u Rimokatolicizmu," in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela u 13 knjiga*, vol. 2 (Šabac: manastir Svetog Nikolaja, 2014), 786.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 791.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Velimirovic, *Religion and Nationality in Serbia* (London: Nisbet, 1915), 10–11.

tional issues, as well as the theological merits of the Catholic clergy, he primarily refers to dissidents and critics of papal authority.<sup>38</sup> This claim is applicable to Alfred Loisy, and his critique of the papal resistance to modernism, and it is also applicable to the Catholic clergy who demanded the introduction of the vernacular in worship in 1848, which was opposed by the first archbishop of Zagreb, Juraj Haulik.<sup>39</sup> However, Buchenau is wrong in his claim that by proposing holiness, catholicity and apostolicity as the characteristics of the new Slavic religion, Nikolaj proposes the characteristics of the Eastern Church, without mentioning Orthodoxy.<sup>40</sup> In the lecture entitled ‘The Agony of the Church’ delivered at St. Margaret’s Church in Westminster, London, in 1917, Nikolaj points out that the Church’s service to national or imperial goals in Europe causes its division, which is contrary to its nature.<sup>41</sup> On the basis of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, which is common to both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church, Nikolaj defines the Church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Here, Nikolaj especially emphasizes the first two characteristics of the Church: its unity, that is, its uniqueness, and its holiness, concluding that divided churches should feel their unity in holiness.<sup>42</sup> When talking about individual churches, he describes their virtues and shortcomings, mentioning as the pope’s main virtue the preservation of the idea of theocracy as the starting point of social teaching about the Church, but also the pope’s main flaw as his failure to transform the Church into a Christocracy and Saintocracy.<sup>43</sup> In the end, Nikolaj argues that the renewal of Christianity in Europe is only possible through the unique Church of Christ, and unity of this Church should be built on the foundations laid by the early Church, by being considerate and condescending in teaching, worship and organization, but strict and exclusive in the keeping of its

<sup>38</sup> Buchenau, *Auf russischen Spuren*, 162.

<sup>39</sup> Vlasta Švoger, “Vjerska problematika u zagrebačkom liberalnom tisku 1848–1852,” *Croatia Christiana Periodica* 56 (2005): 121–145; 133.

<sup>40</sup> Buchenau, *Auf russischen Spuren*, 162.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholai Velimirovic, *The Agony of the Church* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1917), 109.

<sup>42</sup> Velimirovic, *The Agony of the Church*, 113.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

spirit.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in the work ‘The Dream of the Slavic Religion,’ by following the Creed, Nikolaj points to three elements that the new religion of the Slavs should have, and that is holiness, catholicity and the apostolate.<sup>45</sup>

It may be concluded that the idea of uniting the Catholic and Orthodox into one Yugoslav Catholic Church<sup>46</sup> did not seem like an impossible mission to Nikolaj. He even stated that in the beginning the Yugoslav church would have about fifty dioceses, half Catholic, half Orthodox, and that the churches would have freedom of teaching, worship and organization, until the fences separating them for centuries were overcome, which would be, according to Nikolaj, not very difficult.

How then to understand Nikolaj’s critique of the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia? The edge of his criticism, both in his lecture on the nationalism of Saint Sava from 1935, and in earlier and later writings, is not directed against the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia itself, but against its dependence on Rome. Nikolaj’s critique of the papacy has a continuity from his early works from 1909 to the famous speech against the Concordat delivered at Valjevo High School in 1937.<sup>47</sup> While in his early works, Nikolaj paid more attention to the reform movements in the Roman Church itself, in his works and public speeches during the 1930s, criticism of the papacy was from the standpoint of the Yugoslav state and church interests. Nikolaj considered the policy of the Vatican, and especially the initiative for signing the Concordat between the Vatican and Yugoslavia, an expression of the imperial policy of Rome, to the detriment of Yugoslav unity. According to Nikolaj, Catholics in Yugoslavia, by recognizing papal authority, renounce not only their independence, but also the evangelical and apostolic foundations of the national church. However, it would be wrong to

<sup>44</sup> Velimirovic, *The Agony of the Church*, 118.

<sup>45</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, “San o slovenskoj religiji kriza u Rimokatolicizmu,” in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela u 13 knjiga*, vol.4 (Šabac: manastir Svetog Nikolaja 2014), 318.

<sup>46</sup> The term Catholic in the name of the church does not relate to Roman Catholicism, but rather to the attribute of catholicity or conciliarity (sabornost), by which the Creed defines the Church.

<sup>47</sup> Grill, *Serbischer Messianismus*, 191.

conclude that Nikolaj criticizes the Roman Church from Orthodox positions, as Buchenau suggests.<sup>48</sup> In his lecture ‘The Nationalism of St Sava,’ Nikolaj refers to the work of Saint Sava in the context of the independence that the Serbian Church gained by uniting all its scattered jurisdictions in the Belgrade Patriarchate in 1920. He draws a parallel between modern times and Sava’s relocation of the center of his church from Constantinople to Žiča, and the replacement of Greek priests and the Greek liturgical language with Serbian clergy and language.<sup>49</sup> Thus, Nikolaj invites the Catholic clergy and people in Yugoslavia to establish their independence in relation to Rome, following the example of Saint Sava, who made the Serbian Church institutionally independent from the Archbishopric of Ohrid and from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Nikolaj insisted also on the idea of church independence from Rome and Constantinople, and again he referred to the work of Saint Sava. In his Vidovdan sermon delivered on June 28, 1939, on the occasion of the 550<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo in the Ravanica Monastery, Nikolaj described Saint Sava as the inventor of the third ecclesiastical authority, which is between the Byzantine and Roman ecclesial authority. The invented ecclesial authority relates to the free national church, which is neither foreign nor international. In his work “The Serbian People as Theodoulos,” Nikolaj argues that, by following the political direction of his father Nemanja, Saint Sava traced the new ecclesial path between Constantinopolitan panhellenism and Roman pantheocracy.<sup>50</sup> Thus, St Sava won over panhellenic chauvinism from Constantinople, while the international papal theocracy from Rome he defeated by creating a *theodoulia*, as service to God, centered in the person of the ruler. This work, written in the midst of the Second World War, has neither a Yugoslav nor an ecumenical dimension, but it includes similar arguments against the international church, no matter whether Roman or Constantinopolitan, as in the lecture on Saint Sava’s nationalism.

<sup>48</sup> Buchenau, *Auf russischen Spuren*, 162.

<sup>49</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, “Nacionalizam Svetog Save,” in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 9, 305–318: 307.

<sup>50</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, “Srpski narod kao teodul”, in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 5, 651–684: 657.



It conclusion, the relation of Nikolaj toward the Catholic Church was always benevolent, while his criticism of the papacy was sometimes very harsh. Probably for him as a student at the Old Catholic theological faculty in Bern it was not difficult to imagine the Catholic Church without the papacy. It seems that Nikolaj was very sincere in both his praise of Catholics and his disapproval of the papacy and therefore it is hard to imagine any deceitfulness on his part which Byford, and to certain extent Buchenau claim.

### **Bishop Nikolaj as a Nationalist: The Nationalism of Saint Sava**

The next characteristic, usually employed in the defamation of political and ideological opponents, is accusations concerning certain hidden agendas. Thus, Milošević was accused of creating Greater Serbia and Putin of creating Greater Russia. As may be seen from the works of Buchenau and Rohdewald, the covert agenda of Nikolaj was his Serbian nationalism, closely associated with the ideas of Svetosavlje and the Kosovo covenant. The problem with such an interpretation is the sheer identification of Serbian nationalism from the 1930s with the one of the 1990s. Thus, the Serbian nationalism from the 1990s appears as a mere continuation of the nationalism from the 1930s. According to Buchenau, the link between the two nationalisms, and at the same time two anti-Westernisms, were the disciples of Justin Popović, and indirectly Nikolaj Velimirović, Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović and Bishop Atanasije Jevtić, who played the most prominent roles in the Serbian Orthodox Church during the 1990s, but also the Serbian Orthodox youth organizations such as *Dveri* and *Obraz*, which considered Nikolaj's teachings as their program.<sup>51</sup>

I intend in the following lines first to analyze Nikolaj's understanding of nationalism and then to use the example of his lecture "Nationalism of St Sava" to demonstrate that his Saint-Savian nationalism is rather a project of Christian universalism than nationalistic particularism.

<sup>51</sup> Klaus, Buchenau, "Orthodox values and modern necessities," in *Civic and uncivic values, Serbia in the post- Milošević Era*, ed. Ola Listhaug, Sabrina Ramet and Dragana Dulić (Budapest: CEU Press, 2011), 111-142.

Buchenau very well observes that the generation of Serbian church intellectuals raised and educated at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to which Nikolaj belonged, adopted nationalism, liberalism and anti-clericalism as core values of both the Church and society.<sup>52</sup> In spite of its positive connotation as love for one’s own nation, nationalism for Nikolaj may also have negative repercussions.

In the book *The War and the Bible*, written in 1931, Nikolaj depicts nationalism, together with materialism, egoism, imperialism and culturalism as possible dangers if they originate from atheism.<sup>53</sup> According to Nikolaj, nationalism, like the other four phenomena, are given to humanity by God as good in themselves, but when employed independently of love and service to God, nationalism turns into an idol or idolatry. The worshiping is not focused on a single idol, but on several ones at the same time, and usually nationalism turns either to materialism and egoism or imperialism.<sup>54</sup>

In his writings from the mid-1930s, Nikolaj pointed to the political deviations of good nationalism. In his article “Between Left and Right” from 1935, Nikolaj criticizes internationalism and fascism, the two most powerful movements and political orders in Europe at that time. Internationalism for Nikolaj was the negation of nation and national determination, while fascism was idolatry of one’s own nation.<sup>55</sup>

Nikolaj’s views on nationalism proclaimed in his lecture “The Nationalism of St Sava” are mostly criticized in modern scholarship due to alleged connection to fascism and anti-ecumenism. The lecture “Nationalism of Saint Sava,” held on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, 1935, on the feast of the Sunday of Orthodoxy at Kolarac People University in Belgrade, Nikolaj dedicates the place that Saint Sava should occupy in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.<sup>56</sup> 1935 marked the seven hundredth anniversary of

<sup>52</sup> Buchenau, “Orthodox Values and Modern Necessities,” 112–113.

<sup>53</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, “Rat i Biblija,” in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 5, 181–251: 234.

<sup>54</sup> Velimirović, “Rat i Biblija,” 235.

<sup>55</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, “Između levice i desnice,” in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 9, 711–712: 711.

<sup>56</sup> The lecture was published under the same title in an excerpt in the Orthodox Library, published by the Association of Serbian Orthodox Clergy of the Archbishopric of Belgrade and Karlovci (Belgrade, 1935, 29), and then in its entirety in the Kra-

the repose of Saint Sava and the whole year was dedicated to him. The lecture was held in the context of the controversy that Nikolaj had with the Archbishop of Zagreb, Antun Bauer, who denied the importance and role of Saint Sava in the joint Yugoslav project.<sup>57</sup>

Nikolaj identified Saint Sava's nationalism with his work on the establishment of the autonomy of the Serbian Church from the Patriarchate of Constantinople and thus the strengthening of the Serbian state. For Nikolaj, the nationalism of Saint Sava 'encompasses the national church, the national dynasty, the national state, the national education, the national culture and the national defense,' but the basis and center of this nationalism is the national Church.<sup>58</sup> Bishop Nikolaj believed that the existence of the national church and the national church language is based on the Gospel and the apostles. In order to substantiate his claim, Nikolaj referred to Christ's message to the apostles to 'baptize all nations' (Matt 28: 15) and to the gift of the Holy Spirit to the apostles at Pentecost to speak tongues other than Hebrew, Greek and Latin (Acts 2: 6-11).

Nikolaj constructs the nationalism of Saint Sava as an evangelical platform that should serve as a model for the establishment of the national church. This nationalism, unlike nationalism that originates from the Enlightenment and secular tradition, is based on faith as a basic principle. According to Nikolaj, the nationalism of Saint Sava is a) evangelical, because it protects the integrity of the human person and helps its perfection, and b) organic, because it protects the individuality of the peoples themselves, preventing them from falling into imperialism and disintegrating into internationalism.<sup>59</sup> By being established on holiness as the highest personal and ecclesiastical ideal, such evangelical nationalism, according to Nikolaj, becomes a barrier to

gujevac magazine *Misionar* 1 (1938), 2-10. Republished in Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela Episkopa Nikolaja u 13 knjiga*, (Šabac: manastir Svetog Nikolaja 2014), 305-318.

<sup>57</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, "Primedba na Okružnicu Presvetlog Gospodina dr Bajera, nadbiskupa zagrebačkog," *Glasnik SPC* 2/9 (1935): 25-28. The text was reprinted and published as "Svetosavska godina. Sveti Sava i savremena Jugoslavija," *Vardar* 12/2 (1935): 1-2.

<sup>58</sup> Velimirović, "Nacionalizam Svetog Save," 306.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-310.

chauvinism and exclusivity toward other nations. According to this Saint-Savian nationalism promoted by Nikolaj, all peoples on earth, regardless of blood, language and religion, are the people of God and brothers among themselves.

Nikolaj constructs not only Serbian, but also Yugoslav history around the person of Saint Sava. In order to describe the role of Saint Sava's nationalism, Nikolaj refers to its three stages: the stage of national heroism, the stage of national geniuses and the stage of national saints.<sup>60</sup> Heroism is reflected in national uprising and the struggle both against imperialism and against ecclesial internationalism. According to Nikolaj, many peoples of Europe have taken this path, but without establishing their nationalism on faith they have either slipped into chauvinism and imperialism at the state level, or internationalism or atheism at the spiritual level. The next degree that protects heroism from negative consequences is genius, which, according to Nikolaj, is reflected in connecting nationalism with faith and the national state with the national church. Only then nationalism is safe from turning into imperialism or chauvinism, because through the national church and the vernacular liturgical language the spirit of the Gospel can penetrate such nationalism and sanctify it. The national geniuses transformed nationalism from service to one's own nation to the service of unity and brotherhood among nations. Ingeniousness is a turn from secular social and state goals toward eternal Christian and universal values. According to Nikolaj, the most important, third and last stage in this pyramid of Saint Sava's nationalism is holiness. Holiness deeply transforms the feeling of national belonging, which is no longer expressed as love for one's own people, nor as universal love for all other peoples, but as love for God. If heroism is expressed as a service to national goals, ingeniousness as a service to universal goals, then holiness is the focus on God and the service to God. According to Nikolaj, Saint Sava combined his heroism in resisting the ecclesial centers of Rome and Constantinople with his ingeniousness in binding the Serbian state to the Serbian church. Finally he achieved holiness by serving God as the first Archbishop of the Serbian church.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

Nikolaj projects all three stages of Saint Sava's nationalism onto the common Yugoslav history. It would be easier to understand Nikolaj's three-stage nationalism of Saint Sava if the analysis is supplemented with similar ideas about common Yugoslav history which he exposed twenty years earlier in his lectures delivered in Great Britain during the First World War.

For Nikolaj the first stage, i.e., heroism, consisted in the establishment of a national state of Yugoslavia. Thanks to the heroism of the Yugoslavs (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), which stretches from the past centuries until the Great War—the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was created as a barrier to European imperialism. At this level of Saint-Savian nationalism are national heroes, such as the Croatian-Slovenian insurgent Matija Gubac and the Serbian leader of the First Serbian Uprising, Karađorđe Petrović, who fought against foreign domination.<sup>61</sup> The next stage is ingeniousness and it consisted of binding faith to the nation so that the nation state would not slip into political or religious chauvinism or imperialism. This process of tying the nation state to the national church was begun by national geniuses, such as the Montenegrin bishop Peter II Petrović Njegoš and the Croatian bishop Josip Juraj Strossmayer,<sup>62</sup> but it is not yet finished. According to Nikolaj, this process should continue through the establishment of independence of the Catholic Church in Yugoslavia from Rome. This process would enable the establishment of a national church of Yugoslavia consisting of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Catholic church of Yugoslavia, and this church will be independent in decision-making and will use the national language for service. The foundation, but also the culmination of this new national church and nation state, would be the saints, and above all the national saints, such as Saint Sava and Saint Symeon the Myrrh-bearer.<sup>63</sup>

According to Nikolaj, Saint Symeon, that is, Stefan Nemanja, was the founder of the Serbian state, while Saint Sava was the founder of the Serbian Church. For Nikolaj, the Serbian church, as the soul of the

<sup>61</sup> Nicholas Velimirović, *The Soul of Serbia* (London: The Faith Press, 1916), 42.

<sup>62</sup> Velimirovic, *Religion and Nationality in Serbia*; Nikolai Velimirovich, *Two Churches and One Nation* (New York: Živa crkva), 8–11.

<sup>63</sup> Velimirovich, *Two Churches and One Nation*, 4–5.

Serbian people, continued to live even after the Serbian state disappeared during the Ottoman occupation.<sup>64</sup> Nikolaj claims that the national ideal of liberation and unification was expressed through the idea of Yugoslavia, while the church ideal should be realized through holiness. Saint Sava, as the forerunner of Yugoslavia and the founder of the national church, stands at the very beginning of the common Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian history, which continues with Patriarch Arsenije Černojević, Karađorđe, Ljudevit Gaj, Valentin Vodnik, Ban Jelačić, all the way to Njegoš and Strossmayer.<sup>65</sup> According to Nikolaj, Saint Sava reconciled two ideals, Yugoslavism and holiness, which the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as well as the national Church in it, should strive for.

It is often believed that Nikolaj was an ardent supporter of the idea of Yugoslavia during the Second World War,<sup>66</sup> and that later in the 1930s, when the Yugoslav project got into trouble, he abandoned it, turning himself toward the Serbian national idea.<sup>67</sup> However, even twenty years later, Nikolaj does not abandon his belief that Saint Sava is and should be the basis of the idea of Yugoslavia, and that Yugoslavia was still the best institutional arrangement for the South Slavs. This is evident from his message to Orthodox believers in his diocese from June 1936 that ‘the Orthodox faith should be their political conviction, and Yugoslavia their common house.’<sup>68</sup>

However, his strategy to convince the Catholic clergy regarding the significance of Saint Sava for the common Yugoslav project, and also Serbian and Croatian people regarding the importance of Yugoslavia as the common house of all South Slavs went in a different direction. He did not construct a common Yugoslav history, but rather turned to European history pointing to attempts of European nations to create national churches.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 5–8.

<sup>66</sup> Radovan Bigović, *Od svečoveka do Bogočoveka* (Beograd: Društvo Raška škola, 1997), 178–179.

<sup>67</sup> Rohdewald, *Götter der Nationen*, 528–533.

<sup>68</sup> Anonymus, “Episkop Nikolaj osvetio je ikonostas crkve u selu Grivcu,” *Politika*, no. 10067, 4 June 1936, 8.

According to Nikolaj, European history is in fact the history of the struggle of European nations for the national Church, led by Hus and Žiška in the Czech Republic, Luther and Leibniz in Germany and Pascal in France, among others. The failure of the national leaders in Europe to first create national churches, and then gather all their compatriots within them, resulted in a rift between the state and the church, that is, the nation and religion. According to Nikolaj, this further led to the separation of political elites from the people, which undermined national unity. Unlike the relatively unsuccessful struggle waged by the peoples of Europe, Saint Sava overcame difficulties on his way to creating the Serbian national church independent from the dominance of medieval ecclesiastical centers of power, such as Rome and Constantinople. According to Nikolaj, Saint Sava built faith into the basis of such nationalism, and presented the national church as the highest expression of this nationalism. Nikolaj concluded his speech by saying that Saint Sava founded his nationalism seven centuries ago, not only as a rebellion against imperialism and the international church, but also as an endeavor based on evangelical and organic principles.<sup>69</sup>

By his lecture on Saint Sava's nationalism as a common identity platform, Nikolaj tried to save the Yugoslav project to some extent. Yugoslavism, which became the state policy of King Alexander Karađorđević after the First World War, was also supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church in Yugoslavia.<sup>70</sup> When King Alexander prorogued the Yugoslav Parliament due to nationalist and communist tendencies in society and introduced a personal dictatorship on January 6, 1929, he had the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In 1930, Patriarch Varnava Rosić expressed support for the Serbian church to the royal nation-building policy of the complete unification of 'brothers of the same blood.'<sup>71</sup> In the period from

<sup>69</sup> Velimirović, "Nacionalizam Svetog Save," 312.

<sup>70</sup> Radmila Radić, "Religion in Multinational State: Case of Yugoslavia," in *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918–1992*, ed. Dejan Djokić (London: Hurst, 2003), 196–207: 197.

<sup>71</sup> Nikola Žutić, "Narodnosna (nacionalna) politika crkava u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji," in *Religija, crkva, nacija: vreme posle rata*, ed. Bogdan Đurović (Niš: Jugoslovensko udruženje za naučno istraživanje religije, 1996), 364–369.

1929 to 1934, many religious organizations were banned as tribal, because in spirit they were contrary to the Yugoslav project.<sup>72</sup> With the assassination of King Aleksandar Karađorđević in Marseilles on 9 October 1934, all the negative consequences of his policy of integral Yugoslavism, or Yugoslav nationalism, came to the surface.<sup>73</sup>

Nikolaj’s lecture on the nationalism of Saint Sava intended to reawaken the same energy that the Yugoslav peoples, or the Yugoslav people, had at the beginning of the common state, and to use that energy to create a common national and Christian identity. However, the nationalism of Saint Sava is not the same as Yugoslav nationalism, as proclaimed by the Yugoslav royal government. The evangelical platform on which Nikolaj wanted to build Yugoslav unity was directly opposite to the policy of coercion exercised by the Yugoslav royal government during the dictatorship. Nikolaj insisted on holiness, not on national unity, as the basis for the nation and state-building project. Nikolaj’s reference to Hitler in the lecture on the nationalism of Saint Sava should also be understood in the context of building a Christian identity, on forced unification and not on the ideal of holiness, and this will be the subject of the next chapter.

### **Nikolaj as Fascist and Anti-Semite: *Reductio at Hitlerum***

The final momentum in rebuking the image of Bishop Nikolaj as a pan-Christian saint and holy figure was his identification as a fascist and anti-Semite. The accusation for fascism went in several directions. Most of these accusations are for Nikolaj’s alleged sympathy for Hitler and fascism. First, Nikolaj was accused of mentioning Hitler in a positive context in his lecture ‘The Nationalism of St Sava’ in March 1935. The second charge against Nikolaj concerned the medal of the Red Cross he received in 1936 by Nazi Germany for restoring the First World War German cemetery in Bitolj in 1926.<sup>74</sup> The final and probably the

<sup>72</sup> Christian Axboe Nielsen, “Policing Yugoslavism: Surveillance, Denunciations, and Ideology during King Aleksandar’s Dictatorship 1929–1934,” *East European Politics and Societies* 23/1 (2009): 34–62.

<sup>73</sup> Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs Identity in King Aleksandar’s Yugoslavia* (Toronto: Toronto University Press 2014), 5.

<sup>74</sup> Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism*, 47.



most persisting accusation of Nikolaj for fascism pertains to his relationship with Dimitrije Ljotić, the leader of the fascist movement Zbor and a collaborator with the German Nazi regime during the Second World War. In spite of the fact that Nikolaj in many public speeches as well as written works severely criticized fascism and Hitler, the interpretations of his lecture of St Sava's nationalism, the affair with the medal he was awarded, and his relationship with Ljotić secured Nikolaj a prominent place in the Encyclopaedia of world fascism.<sup>75</sup> Although several books and articles have been written so far in which the accusations against Nikolaj for fascism are argumentatively rebuked,<sup>76</sup> the view of Nikolaj Velimirović as a fascist became conventional wisdom. Without intending to repeat all the argumentation offered in these works I intend to briefly review these charges.

In his lecture "The Nationalism of Saint Sava," Nikolaj refers to Hitler:

'One must commend the current German Leader, who, as a simple craftsman and a common man, realized that nationalism without faith is an anomaly, a cold and insecure mechanism. In the 20th century he arrived at the idea first introduced by Saint Sava, and although a layman, he took upon himself that most important of all missions, one that is only worthy of a saint, a genius, a hero.'<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Byford, "The Serbian Orthodox Church," 492. See also Srećko Petrović, „Neki aspekti eklisiologije dijaspore u misli Vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića: ka crkvenom odgovoru na pitanja nacionalizma i etnofiletizma”, in *Mesto eklisiologije u savremenoj sistematskom bogoslovlju*. Naučni skup – kolokvijum, 11. februar 2021. Zbornik radova, ed. Zlatko Matić, Aleksandar Đakovac, Rade Kisić (Beograd: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet Univerziteta u Beogradu – Institut za Sistematsko bogoslovlje, 2021), 165–210: 180–181.

<sup>76</sup> Vladimir Dimitrijević, *Oklevetani svetac. Vladika Nikolaj i srbofobija* (Gornji Milanovac: Lio 2007); Bojan Belić, *Vladika Nikolaj, Hitler i Evropa – kontroverze* (Valjevo: Valjevska gimnazija, 2019); Rastko Lompar, "Zatočeništvo patrijarha Gavrila i episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića u Dahauu 1944. godine," *Studije istorije Ilarion* 3 (2018): 9–29; Rastko Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić – učitelj ili farisej* (Beograd: Catena mundi, 2021), 251; Srećko Petrović, "Neki aspekti eklisiologije dijaspore u misli Vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića," 165–210; Željko Perović, "Da li je Sveti Vladika Nikolaj bio fašista? Pregled njegovih svetosavskih obraćanja od marta 1935. godine do aprila 1941. godine," *Nicholai Studies* 1/2 (2021): 395–434.

<sup>77</sup> Velimirović, "Nacionalizam Svetog Save," 311.

Nikolaj’s reference to Hitler’s realization that nationalism without faith is an anomaly has several elements. First, Nikolaj probably understood that the unification of 28 Protestant churches of Germany in the movement known as German Christians (*die Deutschen Christen*) in 1933 and 1934 was a step toward the creation of a German national church and that this process was supported by Hitler.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, Nikolaj perceived the intention of Hitler to create a national church and unify it with the nation state worthy of a genius, because this is related to the second stage of Saint Savian nationalism. Second, Nikolaj’s claim that Hitler realized something did not mean that Hitler succeeded in his plans. The creation of the German national church for Nikolaj included the unification of the Protestant churches with the Catholic church as well, and this did not happen. In his letter to Bishop Dionisije from 1946, Nikolaj states that in his lecture ‘The Nationalism of St Sava’ he did not glorify Hitler but Saint Sava, because as a saint, genius and hero St Sava united the Serbian people through the Serbian Church, while Hitler and Pascal failed in similar endeavors.<sup>79</sup> Third, Nikolaj’s reference to Hitler might also be understood as a warning of what nationalism might become without faith. Nikolaj is very clear in his article ‘Between Left and Right’ from December 1935 that fascism was idolatry of one’s own nation.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the reference to Hitler in his lecture on Saint Savian nationalism was a kind of prediction that German nationalism might slip into chauvinism and imperialism if Hitler failed to establish a national church and unite it with the national state. This happened at the end.

Nikolaj’s reference to Hitler might also be interpreted in the context of internationalism, which contrary to fascism is the negation of nation. The only internationalism Nikolaj mentions in his lecture is the ecclesial internationalism of Constantinople and Rome which Saint Sava opposed by establishing an independent Serbian Church. As a

<sup>78</sup> Dimitrijević, *Oklevetani svetac*, 58; Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 4-5.

<sup>79</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, “Pismo Episkopu Dionisiju od 20. februara 1946. godine,” in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 10, 704-705: 705.

<sup>80</sup> Velimirović, “Između levice i desnice,” 711.

bishop of the Serbian Church, Nikolaj was a witness of the revival of both ecclesial internationalisms. As a representative of the Serbian Church in the inter-Orthodox preparatory committee in 1930 at the monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos, Nikolaj was aware of the attempts of the Greek metropolitans (especially Metropolitan Germanos Strenopoulos of Thyateira of the Constantinopolitan Patriarchate) to impose the Greek language on other non-Greek churches as the official language in the Orthodox Church.<sup>81</sup> For all those Slavonic churches, which experienced the rule of the Phanariot bishops during the Ottoman period, a move in this direction was nothing else than ecclesial imperialism. Nikolaj pointed also in the direction of the Roman Church. During the pontificate of Pope Pius XI the Roman Catholic Church concluded a number of concordats, for example with Romania and Lituania in 1927, and with Germany in 1933. For Nikolaj concordats in which the Catholic Church agreed with European states was also a form of internationalism or ecclesial imperialism directly opposite to the Gospel and Christian traditions, and a sign of disrespect to the nations and national languages. In this respect the situation in Germany and Yugoslavia was for Nikolaj similar because the Catholics in both countries had to serve a foreign pope. While Nikolaj wanted to liberate Orthodox Serbs from the ecclesial rule of Constantinople and Catholic Croats from the ecclesial rule of Rome, many Catholics considered their affiliation with Rome as crucial for their Catholic identity. Thus, in his book *Deadly Sins* from 1937, the Ustaša leader Ante Pavelić argued that it is impossible “to change the thousand years old orientation of Croats-Catholics and to interrupt the existing relationship between them and the Holy See.”<sup>82</sup> This statement of Pavelić demonstrates that it is possible to be fascist and internationalist at the same time, which was unthinkable for Nikolaj. Nikolaj’s reference to Hitler, therefore, did not intend to glorify Hitler, but to convince Catholics to renounce the rule of the Roman pope and together with Orthodox Serbs work on church unity and Yugoslav identity.

<sup>81</sup> Petrović, “Neki aspekti eklisiologije dijaspore u misli Vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića,” 178.

<sup>82</sup> Cited from Vladimir Dedijer, *Vatikan i Jasenovac. Dokumenti* (Beograd: Rad, 1987), 71.

The reference to the medal Nikolaj received from Germany for the restoration of the German military cemetery can hardly prove Nikolaj’s adherence to fascism, but it is an interesting case because of the scholarly interpretations and misinterpretations. For example, Byford states that in 1934 “Velimirović received the medal at a high-profile ceremony at the German Embassy in Belgrade, which was attended by representatives of the Yugoslav government and the Patriarch Varnava Rosić.”<sup>83</sup> Substantiating his claim by the Yugoslav press, Srećko Petrović places this event in October 1936 and denies the presence of Nikolaj at the German embassy.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, Petrović observes that the choice of retired bishop Jerotej Gavrilović and not a more important figure of the Serbian Church to be the representative of Patriarch Varnava Rosić at this ceremony explains the stance of the Serbian Church towards Germany.<sup>85</sup> The whole issue about awarding Nikolaj with the German medal of the Red Cross can hardly be of any importance regarding Nikolaj’s relationship with fascism, but it obviously plays a role in the ongoing debate.

The most persistent accusation against Nikolaj for fascism stemmed from Nikolaj’s relationship with Dimitrije Ljotić. It has become conventional wisdom to claim that Nikolaj Velimirović, as a personal friend of Dimitrije Ljotić, the leader of the Serbian fascist movement ‘Zbor,’ was a follower of Ljotić and Zbor.<sup>86</sup> Focusing on the character of Nikolaj, Byford argues that Ljotić was rather the follower and disciple of Velimirović, than vice versa.<sup>87</sup> Rastko Lompar maintains that there are three different interpretations of the relationship between Nikolaj and Ljotić: a) they complemented each other’s actions as representatives of religion and politics, b) Ljotić manipulated Nikolaj for his own political

<sup>83</sup> Byford, *Denial and Repression of Antisemitism*, 47.

<sup>84</sup> Petrović, “Neki aspekti eklisiologije dijaspore u misli Vladike Nikolaja Velimirovića,” 180.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>86</sup> Ljubica Štefan, *Srpska pravoslavna crkva i fašizam* (Zagreb: Globus 1996); Ljubica Štefan, *Pregled srpskog antisemitizma* (Zagreb: Alatir 1992).

<sup>87</sup> Jovan Byford, “Willing Bystanders: Dimitrije Ljotić ‘Shield Collaboration’ and the Destruction of Serbia’s Jews,” in *In the Shadow of Hitler*, ed. Rebecca Haynes and Martyn Rady (London: IB Tauris 2011), 300.

ends, and c) Ljotić was an exponent of Nikolaj.<sup>88</sup> In analyzing all three interpretations, Lompar came to the conclusion that in the period between the Concordat crisis in 1937 and Yugoslavia's joining the Tripartite pact in 1941 Nikolaj to a certain extent supported the movement Zbor, but never publicly and resolutely.<sup>89</sup> When it comes to the personal relation between Nikolaj and Ljotić neither Ljotić controlled Nikolaj, nor Nikolaj Ljotić. Lompar argues that by being 'ideological fellow travelers,' they did have foci on similar issues in their public appearances and writings, such as communism, fascism, Jews, European secularism, but different, sometimes opposite, views on how to deal with these issues.<sup>90</sup> Both authors were considered fascists, anti-Communists and anti-Semites, but there were differences between them on these particular issues.

Nikolaj's last benevolent reference to Hitler was in his lecture "The Nationalisms of Saint Sava" from March 1935. This is not surprising because at that time many Yugoslav and European intellectuals, including Serbian church dignitaries, such as Patriarch Varnava Rosić, praised Hitler.<sup>91</sup> However, already in December 1935, in his article 'Between Left and Right,' Nikolaj proposes the middle way between communism, which is on the left, and fascism which is on the right.<sup>92</sup> By the end of the 1930s, Nikolaj became very harsh in his criticism of fascism and Hitler, comparing them with "the antichrist," "Satan's evil," and the "apocalyptic beast."<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Nikolaj criticized communism as a totalitarian ideology, but his critique of communism was much milder than his critique of fascism.<sup>94</sup> Nikolaj criticized communism for being atheistic, and he hoped that future generations would want com-

<sup>88</sup> Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić – učitelj ili farisej*, 237.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>92</sup> Velimirović, "Između levice i desnice," 711.

<sup>93</sup> Miloš Timotijević, "Dunuli su vihorni vetrovi: stavovi episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića o Jevrejima, liberalizmu, komunizmu i nacizmu u štampi Žičke eparhije pred Drugi svetski rat," *Naša prošlost* 8 (2007): 97–119: 117.

<sup>94</sup> Miloš Timotijević, "Interwar attitudes of Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović towards Communism," here, 147.

munism in the name of Christ.<sup>95</sup> While imprisoned at the monastery of Vojlovica together with Patriarch Gavriilo Dožić, Nikolaj several times fended off German insistence to give moral support to the anti-communist front in Serbia, because this would have meant taking the side of the German fascists and endorsing the occupation of Serbia.<sup>96</sup> A few weeks before the total collapse of the Third Reich, sensing that fascism would be soon dead, Nikolaj called for national unity and a common front of the troops of Dragoljub Mihailović, Dimitrije Ljotić and Milan Nedić against Tito’s Communist state in Yugoslavia.

Contrary to Nikolaj, Ljotić was in the mid-1930s suspicious of Hitler and German Nazism, while toward the beginning of the Second World War he became an ardent supporter of Hitler.<sup>97</sup> In 1935, Ljotić also had a positive understanding of Marxism and communism as the justified criticism of capitalism,<sup>98</sup> but already in 1936, he and his movement entered in armed conflicts with the communists in Serbia.<sup>99</sup>

Regarding the anti-Semitism of Nikolaj and Ljotić, they had opposite trajectories like their views on fascism. While Nikolaj’s anti-Semitic and anti-Judaist attitudes were strongest during the 1920s, they alleviated immediately before the Second World War, when he stood against the anti-Semitic propaganda of Zbor and the anti-Semitic laws of the Yugoslav government.<sup>100</sup> Contrary to Nikolaj’s anti-Semitism, Ljotić’s anti-Semitism progressed from the Christian anti-Judaism<sup>101</sup> he propagated until mid-1930s to classical anti-Semitism, without the racial dimension of German Nazism, to which he turned during WWII.<sup>102</sup> They also had opposite views on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. While Ljotić praised and promoted them, Nikolaj rejected them.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, „Tri aveti evropske civilizacije”, *Hrišćanska misao*, August-September 1939, 99–101.

<sup>96</sup> Radmila Radić, *Život u vremenima: Patrijarh Gavriilo (Dožić): 1881–1950* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2006), 232–233.

<sup>97</sup> Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić – učitelj ili farisej*, 250.

<sup>98</sup> Dimitrije Ljotić, „Čudna sprega,” *Sabrana dela*, vol. 3, 98.

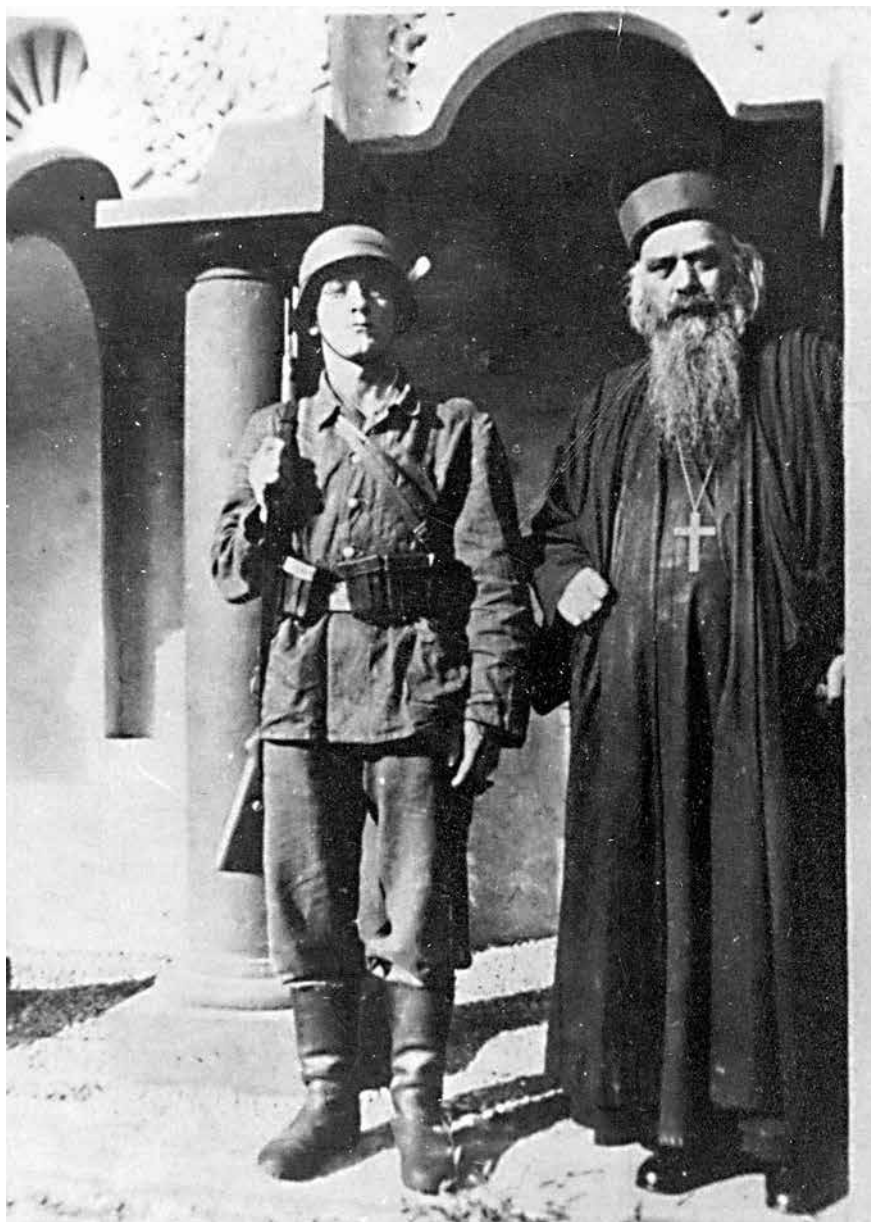
<sup>99</sup> Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić – učitelj ili farisej*, 164.

<sup>100</sup> Timotijević, “Dunuli su vihorni vetrovi,” 109, 111.

<sup>101</sup> Holm Sundhaussen, “Ljotić Dimitrije,” in: *Handbuch des Antisemitismus 2* (Berlin: De Gruyter Saur 2008), 486–487.

<sup>102</sup> Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić – učitelj ili farisej*, 165–166.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.



Bishop Nikolaj and a German soldier in the monastery of Žiča in 1941  
(Courtesy of the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Valjevo)

As Miloš Timotijević argues, Nikolaj’s anti-Semitism had a double origin. The main origin and the root of his anti-Semitism was Christian anti-Judaism, i.e., an attitude that stems from the Bible narrative that the Jewish priests were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ. This is evident in Nikolaj’s allegorical story about Jesus as a lamb and Jewish priests as wolfs published in January 1928 in Belgrade’s magazine *Vreme (Time)*.<sup>104</sup> The second origin of Nikolaj’s anti-Semitism was an attitude, adopted from white Russian refugees in Yugoslavia, that Jews masterminded the October revolution in 1917 and inspired Russian communists to persecute Christians. Such an attitude may be seen in the article “Against the godless communism” from 1940, in which the author, later proved to be Nikolaj, accuses Karl Marx as a Jew that by his proclamation of religion as opium of the masses he motivated attacks on Christ and the Church.<sup>105</sup> A direct consequence of such atheistic ideology was the disappearance of Christian Russia.

The book that contributed immensely to the attitude about Nikolaj as an anti-Semite is *Words to Serbian People through the Dungeon Window*. The suspicion in Nikolaj’s authorship of this book has been already expressed by other scholars,<sup>106</sup> but this did not have much effect of scholars keen in proving Nikolaj’s fascist orientation. I will just repeat my views exposed elsewhere, why it is hard to believe that Nikolaj is the sole author of this work.<sup>107</sup>

The bishop of the Central European Diocese of the Serbian Church, Lavrentije Trifunović, as the editor of the *Collected Works of Bishop Nikolaj* (published in Himmelsthür in Germany in 1986) decided to include the text “Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window” in volume 13. This text was published for the first time in Himmelsthür in 1985 on the basis of the alleged autograph found in the attic of the

<sup>104</sup> Timotijević, “Dunuli su vihorni vetrovi,” 102.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>106</sup> Radmila Radić, Radio emisija, *Peščanik* 24 May 2003; <https://pescanik.net/136-emisija/>; Jovan Ćilibrić, “Izraelci nas odlično razumeju,” *Jevrejski pregled* 2, February 2009, 6–8: 7; Srećko Petrović, “Is Nikolai Velimirovich the author of the book *Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window?*,” *Philotheos* 20/2 (2020): 260–303.

<sup>107</sup> Vladimir Cvetković, “The Freedom from Passions and the Freedom for All: St Nikolaj Velimirović on Democracy,” *Nicholai Studies* 1 (2021): 53–80.



Serbian church in Linz a few years earlier. As a proof of the authenticity of this work the editor Bishop Lavrentije included a photograph of one sheet of paper from the alleged autograph in the *Collective Works*. In the short introduction to the text, Bishop Lavrentije argues that the work was undoubtedly written by Bishop Nikolaj in Dachau, because the author refers to Germans and Germany with a letter G instead of using full nouns. However, there are many spurious facts in regard to this work, which need some explanation.

First, the printed text in the *Collective Works* occupies more than 160 pages, and could at least occupy the same number of pages in the autograph. Producing a text of such a length during more than a month of his imprisonment in Dachau<sup>108</sup> under constant surveillance and hiding it from the German guards looks hardly like a feasible endeavor for Nikolaj. Therefore, it is hardly possible that a text of such a length was produced in Dachau. Moreover, in a letter to Atanasije Jevtić from March 3, 1972, Justin Popović claims that he came across the handwritten sermons of Bishop Nikolaj, and decided to integrate them in his book *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*.<sup>109</sup> At the same time, Justin adds that he did not get permission from Uncle Jova to mention the manuscript and its title. It could be assumed that the mentioned Uncle Jova is actually the bishop of Šabac-Valjevo, Jovan Velimirović, the nephew of Bishop Nikolaj and at the same time the owner of Nikolaj's sermons. As the editors and translators of Justin Popović's *Orthodox Church and Ecumenism* into Greek, Atanasije Jevtić and Amfilohije Radović refer to these sermons of Nikolaj as writings from Dachau,<sup>110</sup> while in the Serbian version the reference to Dachau is missing. Parts of chapters 12, 16, 18, 25, 27, 30, 32, 35, 40, 42, 44 of *Words to Serbian People through the Dungeon Window* appear ad verbatim in *The Orthodox Church and Ecumenism*. It is more probable to suppose that the sermons at stake are from the interwar period, and not from Dachau,

<sup>108</sup> Lompar, "Zatočeništvo patrijarha Gavrila i episkopa Nikolaja Velimirovića u Dahauu 1944. godine," 18.

<sup>109</sup> Justin Popović, "Pismo 146 Atanasiju Jevtiću od 3. 3. 1972," u: Prepodobni Otac Justin, *Pisma I* (Beograd: Manastir Ćelije 2020), 295–296: 295.

<sup>110</sup> Αρχιμ. Ιουστίνου Πόποβιτς, *Ορθόδοξος Εκκλησία και Οικουμενισμός* (Θεσσαλονίκη: Εκδόσεις „Ορθόδοξος Κυψέλη,” 1974), σελ. 234.

and that they existed as copies. Moreover, Srećko Petrović notes that communication between prisoners in Dachau was strictly forbidden and Nikolaj did not have any opportunity to address people publicly.<sup>111</sup>

Second, the noun “Germans” appears only twice in the whole text and both times in reference to the First World War.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, the German people appear in an affirmative context as being the instruments of the divine punishment of the Serbian people for their sins during WWI. It would be more likely that during Nikolaj’s imprisonment in Dachau, where “he suffered intense agonies as a Nazi prisoner,”<sup>113</sup> his attitudes toward Nazis changed for the worse, and not for the better. Thus, it is surprising that Nazis who were just a few years earlier “Satan’s evil,” and the “apocalyptic beast,”<sup>114</sup> become the instruments of divine providence. Similarly, the nouns “Jews” and “Jewish” appear around 150 times in an extremely negative context. The author accuses Jews that they are the inventors of all evils that came upon Europe and responsible for its tragic destiny. The question arises why Nikolaj would hide this text from German guards if it contains the worst anti-Jewish propaganda, which almost justifies the German treatment of Jews during the Second World War. It is also surprising that Nikolaj, who had randomly criticized, but also defended Jews in previous writings and sermons, attacks them suddenly and furiously from a concentration camp, knowing that thousands of them have been killed on a daily basis. This attitude is also in stark contrast to his pre-WWII opposition to the anti-Jewish laws of the Yugoslav government and the anti-Semitic propaganda of Zbor. Moreover, Nikolaj’s anti-Semitism was mainly expressed through Christian anti-Judaism and the accusation against Jews for masterminding the October revolution. Suddenly, the Jews are also accused of inventing democracy, socialism and religious tolerance, something that Nikolaj highly valued before but also after the Second

<sup>111</sup> Petrović, “Is Nicholai Velimirovich the author of the book *Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window?*,” 267.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>113</sup> “Bishop Nicolai Seriously Ill,” *American Srbobran*, Vol. L, No. 11, 575, February 29, 1956: 2. Cf. Petrović, “Is Nicholai Velimirovich the author of the book *Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window?*,” 270.

<sup>114</sup> Timotijević, “Dunuli su vihorni vetrovi,” 117.

World War. Last but not least, Nikolaj's latter works lack evidence and references to his writings from Dachau.<sup>115</sup>

A possible explanation is that the work "Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window" was composed of Nikolaj's interwar sermons to which is added the anti-Jewish writings of some Zbor members. There were many examples in Nikolaj's letters written during the 1950's in which he wanted to distance himself from the actions of Zbor members in the emigration. Nikolaj even labelled the Zbor movement as "national godlessness" in order to differentiate it from communist godlessness.<sup>116</sup> On several occasions Nikolaj prevented Zbor members usurping and exploiting for their political goals the publishing house "Svečanik" in Munich founded by Nikolaj.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, it would not be hard to imagine that some Zbor members in Austria or Germany combined Nikolaj's interwar sermons with their anti-Semite, anti-ecumenical and anti-democratic works, and persuaded the editors of the Collected works of Nikolaj of the authenticity of this work. However, it is surprising that the scholars who attempted to prove Nikolaj's anti-Semitism on the basis of this work never took the argument of its inauthenticity as plausible, in spite of the fact that this argument circulated before they built their case against Nikolaj.

## Conclusion

The conventional wisdom about the Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović depicts him as the main ideologue and the chief cause of Serbian Saint-Savian nationalism and anti-Westernism, as a cunning and deceitful

<sup>115</sup> In several letters to Fr Aleksa Todorović, Velimirović mentions his works written during the Second World War, including some writings from Dachau but he never refers to the particular book. See letters to Aleksa Todorović, one is undated, but probably written in early 1951, and another is from 19th of March 1953 in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 13, 659–660; 693–694. Cf. Petrović, "Is Nikolaj Velimirovič the author of the book Words to the Serbian People Through the Dungeon Window?" 275.

<sup>116</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, Pismo Aleksu Todoroviću od 30. aprila 1952. godine, in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 13, 677.

<sup>117</sup> Nikolaj Velimirović, Pismo Aleksu Todoroviću od 2. aprila 1953. godine, in: Episkop Nikolaj, *Sabrana dela*, vol. 13, 699.

churchman, as a proponent and inspirer of Serbian nationalism, and finally as a fascist and an anti-Semite. These accusations against Nikolaj were framed according to a media strategy previously applied to some political leaders, such as Slobodan Milošević, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. This strategy consists of four stages or levels. At the first level it is necessary to demonstrate the responsibility or main responsibility of a person for some wrongdoings, such as wars, violence or demoting democratic institutions. The second stage is to point out certain mental deficiencies of this person. The third stage relates to some covert agenda that this person is driven by, and the fourth stage pertains to comparing this personality with Hitler and finding similarities. The same strategy is applied to Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. Thus, he has been seen as the chief ideologue of Saint-Savian nationalism and anti-Westernism of the Serbian people, and therefore the main cause of all wrongdoings of the Serbian people in the 20th century. Due to his positive attitudes toward Catholics in Yugoslavia and the Catholic Church in general, and at the same time severe opposition to the Concordat between Yugoslavia and the Catholic Church he was perceived as a deceitful person and a cunning opportunist. This alleged moral corruption of Nikolaj relates to the second stage of the aforementioned strategy. The third stage pertains to the alleged hidden agenda of Nikolaj. Thus, all of his actions toward the unification of the South Slavs, as well as his ecumenical endeavors are perceived as a covert agenda of Serbian expansion and domination in Yugoslavia and the conversion of all Yugoslav people into Orthodox Christianity. Finally, *reductio ad Hitlerum* is achieved by comparing Nikolaj with Hitler. Several events from Nikolaj's life as well as several of his writings are employed in order to demonstrate Nikolaj's fascism and anti-Semitism, the features he shares with Hitler. Since these constructions on Nikolaj are of a later date, mainly promulgated in international, especially German, scholarship in the last two decades, it is pertinent to explore their objectivity.

The main cause of the Yugoslav wars for the international media and to some extent international scholarship during the 1990's was Slobodan Milošević. After Milošević was extradited to the Hague tribunal in 2001, the narrative of his sole responsibility was replaced with the alternative narrative about the permanent danger of Serbian national-

ism, that caused not only the Yugoslav wars but also jeopardizes the very fragile peace in the Balkans. The Serbian Orthodox Church was deemed as the main generator of this nationalism, while Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović and his disciple Justin Popović are indicated as the chief inspirers of this nationalist ideology cherished by the Serbian Church. The link between Nikolaj and Justin and the present day was established through Justin Popović's spiritual children and influential bishops of the Serbian Church during the Yugoslav wars, Amfilohije Radović, Atanasije Jevtić, Artemije Radosavljević and Irinej Bulović. They played a prominent role in defining and expressing the interests of the Serbian people during the wars, especially in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, which are interpreted by the international media and scholarship as the ideology of Saint Savian nationalism invented by Nikolaj.

The charge against Nikolaj for fueling with his attitudes current Serbian nationalism is further extended with charges of being anti-ecumenist, nationalist, fascist and an anti-Semite. He was accused of being deceitful in his relationship to the Catholic Church, because at the same time he worked on the unity between Catholics and Orthodox he opposed the Roman pope. Nikolaj perceived the dependence of Catholics on the Roman pope and the dependence of the Orthodox on the Constantinopolitan patriarch as the relics of imperial times and ecclesial imperialism, and he looked for liberation of the Catholics in Yugoslavia from Vatican rule as he previously supported the liberation of Orthodox Serbs from the rule of the Phanar. He was very honest in his views from his earliest to his latest works.

The Serbian nationalism ascribed to Nikolaj is presented as a certain hidden agenda. However, as a severe critic of nationalism as the idolatry of nations, Nikolaj proposed to couple service to one's own nation with the service to universal humanity and to God. Thus, Nikolaj wanted to prevent the transformation of nationalism into chauvinism, as the hatred of other people, or imperialism, as the rule over other different people. Moreover, he wanted to establish nationalism on faith, as a permanent category of human existence, and thus preserve national identity as something valuable. Therefore, his nationalism was neither Serbian nor Yugoslav and it is not restricted to the political and

economic goals of a particular nation, but is rather perceived as a step on the ladder toward God, fulfilling its purpose only in respect to such an end.

Finally, in spite of spending almost the whole the Second World War as a German prisoner, first in several monasteries in Serbia, and finally in Dachau, Nikolaj was portrayed as a fervent follower of the Nazis. A positive reference to some of Hitler's actions from 1935, an acceptance of the Red Cross from the German Embassy in Yugoslavia in 1936, an acquaintance with the leader of the fascist movement in Yugoslavia in the period before the Second World War and finally a book with anti-Semite messages attributed to him posthumously were exposed as evidence of his fascism and anti-Semitism. Many other events and written accounts that prove the opposite were completely overlooked and neglected. Similarly, his Christian anti-Judaism from the 1920s, very common in theological circles at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were proclaimed as racial anti-Semitism. Again, his critique of Yugoslav anti-Jewish laws and anti-Semite propaganda of the Zbor movement as well as his hiding of a Jewish family from the persecution of the Nazis at the beginning of the Second World War in Yugoslavia were totally ignored. Finally, the anti-Semite passages from the work attributed to him 25 years after his death served as the strongest evidence. However, the style as well as content of these passages were in stark opposition to all issues he stood for during his life, including ecumenism, democracy and science.

Without entering the reasons and motives for such interpretations, it is obvious that many of the charges against Nikolaj do not stand. Therefore, it would be pertinent to abandon the conventional wisdom about Nikolaj as a fascist and anti-Semite and put his life and work again under rigorous scholarly scrutiny.

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